The Fourth Church Pulpit

AND MERCY SHALL FOLLOW ME

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture
First Lesson Exodus 25:17-22
Second Luke 6:27-36

"...Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life..."
Psalm 23:6 (NRSV)

The article on the front page of the paper was deeply disturbing. I thought about it all day. A young man, 14 years old, had shot and killed another young man, 13, who was standing outside his apartment in the Robert Taylor Homes. The victim was a lively, bright boy, supported and loved by his parents and strong extended family — aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents. The boy on trial had no family, did not know who his father was. His mother did not even come to his trial. The court psychologist testified that he was passive and fatalistic. Now, sadly this is not an unusual story to see on the front page of the newspaper. One teenager killing another. What I found chilling was that no one involved, defense attorneys, social worker, psychologist — not even the judge — could extract from the defendant anything resembling remorse for the act of killing, or compassion for the victim and his family. His guilt was not in question. He testified that he had shot at the building because a gang superior told him to, gave him the rifle to do it. He shot and killed a 13-year-old — an innocent bystander. And during the trial, he listened intently but showed no sign of remorse.

It is a kind of ultimate urban nightmare — an adolescent with no feelings and an automatic weapon in his hand. In twenty years or so he'll be out of prison, and unless the penal system instills in him or elicits something from him like mercy or compassion he will, everybody knows, do it again. We have, the *New York Times* editorialized not long ago, a "crisis of compassion" in the land. We have adolescents with no capacity to feel pity. And we have politicians using "bleeding heart, do-gooder" as an insult, as if caring too much was a sign of weakness: as if it were a bad idea to be merciful.

In his best-selling collection of stories, *The Book of Virtues*, William Bennett comments,

> "Compassion is a virtue that takes seriously the reality of the other persons, their inner lives, their emotions, as well as their external circumstances. Compassion thus comes close to the very heart of moral awareness, ... " [p. 106].

And one of the most famous lines of Shakespeare is spoken by Portia, in *The Merchant of Venice*, about mercy.

> Mercy "is twice blest:
> It blesseth him that gives and him that takes ...
> It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
> It is an attribute of God himself,
> And earthly power doth then show likest God's,
> When mercy seasons justice."

Perhaps. Perhaps earthly power is like God's power when mercy seasons justice. But no one I know won an election recently talking like that ... about mercy and compassion. What garners votes these days is capital punishment, reductions in health care and education to our children, reducing benefits to immigrants, even caning. The simple fact is that we seem to be convinced that compassion and economic reality are mutually exclusive. We have become persuaded that we cannot afford mercy.

And yet it is at the very heart of our religious tradition — at the heart of what the tradition means by the word "God."

When the Hebrew people were wandering around in the wilderness of Sinai their religious worship focused on the Ark of the Covenant. When they made camp, they erected a tent around the ark called the tabernacle. The

theological idea was radical. It was that God traveled with the people: God is not confined to a particular temple or sacred spot, but lived with the people wherever they were. In the first lesson this morning, we heard a description of one of the features of the Ark, something called the Mercy Seat,

> "a slab of specifically refined gold on top of the Ark, ..." [*Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*]...
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> "the most sacred object in the most holy place: (The Mercy Seat) was the throne of Yahweh." [*Interpreter's Bible*] "I will meet you there" — at the Mercy Seat, God says, in Exodus 25.

The interesting thing about it is the name, "Mercy Seat." Where did that come from — all the way back there on the edge of history? Why not Judgment Seat? Or Anger Seat? Or Jealousy Seat? Or Power Seat? Why mercy — in a time when mercy, compassion, and kindness were not common attributes one associated with God? Primitive religion usually focuses on the power, or mystery of the divine, not mercy. What is happening, of course, is the earliest appearance of a magnificent idea. It is the basic nature of God to be merciful. This primitive symbol of the mercy seat is saying, above and beyond all else that God is — God is merciful.

From that original amazing grace came the further genius of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The needy, the weak, and the vulnerable always get special mercy. God is particularly attentive to the poor and oppressed. And there is a political and social ethic which follows. The people, the nation, will be held accountable for the degree of mercy it shows to the weakest and smallest and most vulnerable: the aged, orphans, widows, sick and poor. Individuals, likewise, are accountable not for verbal affirmations of piety. Love for God translates into merciful action towards your fellow human beings.

The most eloquent expression of this radical idea was written by the prophet Micah:

> "With what shall I come before the Lord.... burnt offerings, calves, thousands of rams, rivers of oil? He has told you ... what is good ... what the Lord requires ... Do justice ... love kindness (mercy) walk humbly with God."

Jesus expressed that ancient tradition of God's mercy and mercy as the basis of common morality.

Most human behavior is based on reciprocity. You do this for me and I will do this back to you. But the radical ethic of Jesus was not based on reciprocity. When someone strikes you, don't respond in kind. Everybody does that. Turn the other cheek, he said. Everybody hates their enemies. You must do good to those who hate you. Even love. It's no great moral accomplishment to love people who love you. Normally, human behavior is reactive ... Someone is surly — be surly back ... Someone shoves you out of place when you're waiting in line — shove back. When on the Dan Ryan, someone tailgates me, then impatiently pulls out and cuts in front too close, I confess, everything in me wants to respond in kind, and sometimes I do. Insult me and I'll insult you. Hit me and I'll hit you harder. It's the story of human history, is it not?

The effect, of course, is to give enormous power to the other person, the one who is acting so badly. If your behavior is only responsive and reactive, your ethical mentor is precisely the one who is treating you so unethically. The result is often tragedy. Revenge, retribution carried out by one nation against another, by society against the individual, or by one person on another person, is not moral, according to Jesus. It's not even smart. It does not discourage bad behavior. No one believes that capital punishment actually has anything to do with the crime rate. What it has to do with is reciprocal morality — revenge — the momentary intoxication of getting even.

Jesus subverted that entire way of thinking and the theology behind it. He challenged and undercut the way his own people thought and acted. They didn't like it at all, nor do we.

What is the source of moral behavior then if it is not reaction, response, revenge? It was one of the simplest and most powerful things he ever said: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." It is a challenging assignment these days.

The lead editorial in the January 1 *New York Times*, "The Quality of Mercy in 1995," commented:

> "A new brand of hard-talking officeholders and social engineers has created a compassion crisis in American political life. How else to explain the withdrawal of all aid from an infant whose mother does not meet Congressionally-mandated rules as to work and sexual behavior?" And then this — "American voters, to be sure, want more efficient social spending and return to bedrock values of family and community. but one of those values is compassion."

The *Chicago Tribune* on Tuesday included an editorial, "More Children Sink into Poverty," which documented the increasing dilemma of the working poor. The number of American children living in poverty increased by one million to six million, or 26% of all children, between 1987 and 1992. The editorial pointed to a "20-year trend of economic bifurcation, hour-glass shaped growth of the lowest and highest income brackets, with the largest toll on poor children."

There are, I think, a lot of rational, common sense and non-political reasons for rethinking the "Contract with America" and the role of government in helping the disadvantaged and providing for children. But we do know that the most cost effective move we can make is to provide a better chance for children. Someone said on The Today Show this week that the second best dollar we can spend is on education for our children. The best dollar is on pre-school and day care so that the children are ready to learn when they go to school. I think there is a logical case to be made for reforming welfare in a way that values family integrity, rewards hard work, and supports it with accessible employment, health care, and transportation. Those issues must continue to receive the best intelligence and creativity we can muster and it is, I believe, our calling — you and I, to add to the very important public debate the wisdom of our religious tradition that holds up mercy as the primary moral value.

But this is not finally about sociology or politics. It is about faith and faithfulness. It is about God and living in a way that honors God.

The quintessential story about mercy, of course, is the parable of the Good Samaritan. It is a story of a man from Samaria, who happens upon another man lying in the ditch beside the road, beaten and bleeding. Two important religious officials have already passed by, seeing him and deciding to ignore him. The hero of the story, the Samaritan, stops, binds up his wounds, transports him to shelter and pays for his care. The interesting thing about that parable is that it is an answer to a theological, spiritual, deeply personal question. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" someone had asked him — not, "What is appropriate social or political behavior?" The story originally had to do with the relative health of an individual's soul. "How can I save my soul?" was the real question. And the answer was, "If you will start to reflect in your life the merciful love God has for you, you will find that God is saving your soul."

This is not about social policy. It is about how to live faithfully, how to follow Jesus. He said if you feel another's pain and minister to it, you will be living the kind of life God gives you to live, a life rich in meaning and purpose and values.

That's a conclusion also reached by Robert Wuthnow, a sociologist at Princeton, who has done an important study, *Acts of Compassion: Caring for Others and Helping Ourselves.* The study inquired into the kinds of volunteer service activities we are doing and what we get out of it.

Wuthnow observes:

> "Volunteers are not naive. They do not believe as some of their critics suggest — that acts of compassion toward needy individuals will actually solve society's problems. No, volunteer work will save us because it implies hope." [p. 233]

I read a sweet little story about mercy and how close it is to the heart of God and the idea of God's kingdom on earth, a kingdom always closest to our children. It is in a book by Christopher deVinck, *The Power of the Powerless.*

"One spring afternoon my five-year-old son, David, and I were planting raspberry bushes along the side of the garage. A neighbor joined us for a few moments. David pointed to the ground. 'Look Daddy! What is that?' I stopped talking with my neighbor and looked down.

"'A beetle,' I said.

"David was impressed and pleased with the discovery of this fancy, colorful creature. My neighbor lifted his foot and stepped on the insect, giving his shoe an after-twist in the dirt. 'That ought to do it,' he laughed.

"David looked up at me, waiting for an explanation, a reason...

"That night, just before I turned off the light in his bedroom, David whispered, 'I liked that beetle, Daddy.'

"'I did too,' I whispered back." deVinck concludes the story by saying, "We have the power to choose ... the power to choose how we will respond to everything that crosses our path from beetles to human beings." [*Weavings,* "Birthing Compassion," Sue Monk Kidd, Nov/Dec. 1990, p. 18].

Citizens of a modern American city know better than anyone that the world can be a cruel, unfeeling place. But the tradition we bear, the religion we claim as our own, is based on the faith that into the world came the creator to sit on something the people of God called a Mercy Seat. We will not, in fact, be dealt with according to our sins, as the Psalmist promised (Psalm 103), but by God's steadfast and merciful love. That's an astonishing idea. Our relationship with God is based not on God's judging our moral purity, but God's mercy which knows us and loves us and is kind to us. Somehow those people came to understand that among all the attributes of God — power, majesty, mystery, omnipotence, righteousness, holiness, perfection, purity — the one that most thoroughly expressed the essence of God was Mercy.

Later, one of their poets wrote a beautiful hymn about that God.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want ...
You prepare a table before me ...
You anoint my head ...
My cup overflows ...
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me,
All the days of my life ..."

Later still, Jesus of Nazareth lived out the mercy of God, welcoming all to him, particularly those who were poor, needy, outcast, living a parable of God's mercy. "Be merciful," he told his friends, "as God is merciful."

The world needs that as never before. Our country needs a church strong enough to show what that means; to advocate and argue for mercy publicly and then honest enough to live it out — in our corporate life.

The world needs us, individual friends of Jesus sure enough of themselves to risk being called bleeding hearts; so sure of his mercy that one day we will be judged, not according to our mistakes and failures, but by a God whose essence is mercy: by a God whose justice is tempered by mercy. People so in love with that God — that "bleeding heart" starts to feel like a badge of honor and not an insult — something to be proud of! Humbly and faithfully merciful people who know and trust and bank their lives on the promise that mercy will follow us all the days of our lives.

Amen.